

# Pleasure, power, and pain: A review of the literature on the experiences of BDSM participants

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## Abstract

Since the explosion of social scientific and sociological research on BDSM in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the field has grown exponentially. In this review, I identify three particularly fruitful recent lines of research in sociological and related approaches to BDSM. First, I discuss work that critically analyzes the meaning(s) of BDSM for participants and the role of debates about the sexual and the erotic in relation to BDSM. Second, I discuss work on BDSM identities, including scholarship that examines BDSM identities in relation to other identities. Here, I also discuss emerging lines of scholarship that focus on the ways in which privileges (particularly race/ethnicity and class) shape identification with and access to BDSM communities. Third, I discuss work on BDSM communities, examining the ways that community organization shapes BDSM experiences. I conclude with suggestions for future research in the field including deepening and broadening intersectional analyses of BDSM experiences, exploring specialized roles and identities that exist within the broader BDSM umbrella, and investigating similarities and differences between those who participate in BDSM on a time-limited basis versus those for whom BDSM is an ongoing, continual core aspect of identity.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

BDSM has gained considerable scholarly attention in the last two decades both within and beyond sociology. Once relegated to the far margins of sociology and studied only through the lens of sexual deviance, in recent years, BDSM has been used as a case study to explore a wide range of social phenomenon. BDSM scholars working from

sociological approaches have used BDSM as a lens onto stigma management, identity development, the possibilities and challenges of cyberspace, agency, serious leisure, sexual citizenship, resistance to normative gender beliefs, the boundaries of the sexual and the erotic, the development of communities and subcultures, embodiment, and many other aspects of social life. Sociological scholarship on BDSM has had a significant impact on the nascent interdisciplinary field of BDSM studies while also illuminating broader questions in sociology.

In what follows, I first provide an overview of the practices and identities involved in BDSM, beginning with key terms and concepts. I then provide a brief outline of the history of academic approaches to BDSM. Next, I identify and discuss three particularly important lines of emerging scholarship in the field and the debates driving current research in these areas, focusing primarily on the sociological literature. One line of research critically analyzes the meaning(s) of BDSM for participants. This line of research is animated by ongoing debates over the role of the sexual and the erotic in understanding BDSM experiences and identities. Another, related line of scholarship focuses on identities. In this line of research, debates over whether BDSM should be understood as interest, identity, orientation, or some combination thereof continue to drive new work. Also in this line of research are a number of important studies that examine the intersections of BDSM with other social identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, and race). Work in this line of research also foregrounds the ways in which privilege shapes identification with and access to BDSM communities. A third line of research examines the organization and dynamics of BDSM communities. In this line of research, scholarship examines the emergence of cyber as well as physical communities. Scholars working in this area also explore the ways that communities differ across national and local geographic contexts and differences among heterosexual/pansexual (het/pan),<sup>1</sup> gay, and lesbian/queer women's BSM communities. After providing a critical assessment of these three particularly productive lines of research, I conclude with suggestions for future directions in the sociology of BDSM.

## 1.1 | Defining BDSM

BDSM is an umbrella category. It encompasses a variety of terms used interchangeably both in the literature and by participants to refer to a range of consensual practices/activities, desires, communities/subcultures, identities/roles, and meanings related to bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and/or sadomasochism (Langdridge & Barker, 2007b; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006, 2007). For readers unfamiliar with BDSM, concise overviews are available in a variety of encyclopedia of human sexuality (Bauer, 2016a, 2016b; Newmahr, 2014; Weiss, 2015; see also Seidman, 2003a).

The term BDSM is sometimes used roughly synonymously with the terms "kink," "sadomasochism," and "leather." Kink is a general term for nonnormative sexuality; like BDSM, it is often used as an umbrella term, but kink is a much broader category than BDSM and includes sexual interests like fetishes, cross-dressing, strap-on sex, and voyeurism. The term sadomasochism—variously abbreviated "S&M," "SM," and "S/M"—refers specifically to experiences that involve physical, psychological, or emotional pain or discomfort. While S&M falls under the BDSM umbrella, many BDSM activities and identities do not involve any form of pain or discomfort. Additionally, the term "sadomasochism" has a long history of use in pathologizing medical discourses and, as such, has fallen out of favor as an umbrella term in recent decades. Leather is a term that originated in gay men's communities in the 1960s and spread to lesbian communities in the 1970s and subsequently to het/pan communities (Rubin, 1994). Leather refers to a specific subset of identities and communities within the broader BDSM umbrella.

Regardless of the specific activities or relationship dynamics involved, the common theme that underlies BDSM activities is that they are consented to by all individuals involved (Langdridge & Barker, 2007a; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; M. Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984; T. Weinberg, 2006). Participants commonly share their "limits" (things that they are unwilling to participate in) with play partners, negotiate what they do and do not want to happen in the context of a BDSM scene, and use "safewords" (terms agreed upon in advance to mean withdrawal of consent) to

create consensual interactions. At the same time, participants themselves recognize the complexity of consent and frame consent as an on-going process, a point to which I return later in the manuscript (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

Two primary models of consent are used by BDSM participants. The first, "Safe, Sane, and Consensual" (SSC), holds that all activities taking place in a BDSM context should be physically and emotionally safe, sane, and consensual. Some participants, however, point out that what seems "sane" to one person may seem different to another and that what is "safe" for one person may likewise be different for another. As a result, many BDSM participants have shifted toward adhering to the "Risk-Aware Consensual Kink" (RACK) model. Like the SSC model, the RACK model emphasizes the importance of consent in all aspects of BDSM interactions. The RACK model, however, shifts away from defining particular activities as blanketly safe or unsafe and sane or not. It operates as a model that emphasizes the importance of being informed and aware of potential harms and individuals deciding for themselves their own acceptable level of risk.

In the context of BDSM, interactions within a specific time period are often called "scenes" or "play" (e.g., "I scened with him last night" and "the last time we played we did a really hot spanking scene"). Some participants, however, dislike those terms because of the connotations of activities labeled as such as being "not real." The term "scene" is also used to refer to a BDSM community in general (e.g., "The Houston BDSM scene is rope-centric"). The term "dungeon" is generally used to refer to a public or semipublic BDSM community space where BDSM play, scenes, or interactions take place and is usually equipped with BDSM furniture such as spanking benches, Saint Andrew's Crosses, and frames for rope suspension.

A wide variety of roles and identities fall under the BDSM umbrella. While some participants see these roles/identities as ones they step into and out of at will, other participants object strongly to the concept of roles, feeling that their BDSM interests are a core part of their identities and who they are as individuals. While the distinctions among roles/identities described below is intended as a general orienting framework, it is important to note that many participants would define these terms otherwise.

The terms top, bottom, and switch generally refer to one's activity or role specifically during play or a scene. Hence, someone can refer to a person as a top ("She's a very good top") or refer to "topping" as a verb ("He topped me last weekend"). The same holds true for the terms bottom and switch. Those who identify as tops generally lead the interaction in a given scene, while those who identify as bottoms generally follow the interaction in a given scene. So, for example, in a flogging scene, the top would generally be the person using the flogger and the bottom would generally be the person receiving impact from the flogger. Some people exclusively top in play, some exclusively bottom in play, and some switch. Self-identified switches may either top or bottom in a given scene, depending on their preference, the partner in question, or their desires at a particular moment.

The terms dominant and submissive<sup>2</sup> generally refer to roles or identities within consensual power exchange interactions or relationships. In such interactions or relationships, one partner—the dominant—takes control of the actions, behavior, appearance, and so forth of another partner—the submissive—within boundaries both individuals negotiate and agree on. People who switch within Dominant/submissive (D/s) relationships may switch within one relationship or may be dominant with one partner or partners and submissive with another/others. The terms Master and slave generally refer to roles or identities that are similar to those of Dominant and submissive but are often used in the context of relationships in which the consensual exchange of power encompasses more areas of life and/or the partners involved negotiate a greater depth of control for one partner than is common in D/s relationships. M/s relationships also tend to be understood as longer term commitments in comparison with D/s commitments, with some participants likening M/s to the BDSM version of a marriage.

A wide variety of other roles and identities also exist under the umbrella of BDSM. A brief, nonexhaustive sampling includes rope bunny; rigger; leatherman and leatherwoman; little, middle, big, and edge player; boot black; puppy; handler; and spanko. As with other BDSM roles and identities, for some, these refer to roles they step into and out of, while for others these are core, fundamental aspects of their identities.

An extremely diverse range of consensual activities falls under the BDSM umbrella, of which I provide an illustrative, nonexhaustive set of examples here. Impact play involves intense physical sensation (e.g., spanking and

whipping). Bondage includes physical restriction of some kind (e.g., handcuffs and rope). Humiliation and other forms of emotional/psychological play involve unpleasant or challenging emotional or psychological sensations (e.g., begging and crawling). Deprivation can be sexual, sensory, or take many other forms (e.g., orgasm denial and blindfolds). Service involves one person providing care or service for another or others (e.g., preparing a meal for or doing laundry for a partner). Body modification can involve making modifications to one's own or another's body and can be temporary or permanent (e.g., piercing and tattooing). Power exchange (allowing someone to control negotiated aspects of one's behavior and/or experiences) can take place either during a time-limited scene or be an underlying aspect of a consensual power exchange relationship (for studies that investigate the range of activities participants engage in, see Alison, Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007; Nordling, Sandnabba, Santtila, & Alison, 2006; Rehor, 2015; Wignall & McCormack, 2017).

Estimates of the size of the BDSM population range from 5% to 25% of the U.S. population (Janus & Janus, 1993; Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994; Rubin, 1994; Scott, 1993), and the increasing representation of BDSM in popular culture suggests this number may be on the rise. BDSM appears more commonly than ever before in mainstream media—prior to and continuing beyond the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon—through references on TV shows such as *Law and Order*, *Will and Grace*, *Sex and the City*, *CSI*, *Weeds*, *The Surreal Life*, *House*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Family Guy*, *Nip/Tuck*, and many others, and in music videos by well-known artists such as Christina Aguilera, Madonna, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and others.

These representations are often highly problematic, however. Popular culture representations often deeply misrepresent fundamental aspects of BDSM. Common patterns in popular culture portrayals of BDSM include depicting BDSM activities that are not consensual, portraying BDSM participants as suffering from mental illnesses, and/or representing BDSM itself as a sign of mental illness (Beckmann, 2005; Langdridge & Barker, 2007a; Weiss, 2006). BDSM participants do not report higher psychopathology or psychological distress than non-BDSM-involved individuals, however (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2005; Richters, de Visser, Riseel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

Additionally, while recent changes to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) remove interest in BDSM from being labeled a disorder, BDSM continues to be highly stigmatized. Pathologization of BDSM persists in both academic and mental health literatures (Barker, Iantaffi, & Gupta, 2007; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2005; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006; Langdridge & Barker, 2007a; Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008; Lin, 2017; Pillai-Friedman, Pollitt, & Castaldo, 2015; Tellier, 2017; Wright, 2006). In sum, BDSM continues to be a frequently marginalized and misunderstood practice (B. Graham, Butler, McGraw, Cannes, & Smith, 2016; Stiles & Clark, 2011; Wright, 2006).

## 2 | THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOLARSHIP ON BDSM

The earliest scholarship on BDSM (then referred to only by the clinical term, “somasochism”) was part of the work conducted by the founding sexologists and was based on clinical case studies that sought to find the underlying causes of sexual “disorders” including BDSM (Ellis, 1901; Freud, 1905; Krafft-Ebing, 1903). These early sexological studies treated BDSM as abnormal and deviant and sought primarily to explain somasochistic etiology and establish “cures.” This pathologizing approach to BDSM characterized much of the work on BDSM through the mid twentieth century; during which time, BDSM was approached through a deviance model and studied as a medical and/or psychiatric “problem” (Beckmann, 2001, 2009; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Newmahr, 2008; Taylor, 1997). The earliest empirical work on BDSM thus sought primarily to explain the underlying causes of BDSM participation and to find effective “treatments,” and this approach to BDSM persisted well into the late-twentieth century (e.g., Avery, 1977; Bach, 1997; Bates, 1975; Baumiester, 1988; Berest, 1970; Brenner, 1959; Breslow, 1987, 1989; Hunter, 1995; Levitt, 1971; Litman, 1983; Malamuth, 1977; Mitchell, 1969; Pierce, 1927; Robertiello, 1970; Schad-Somers, 1982). Around the middle of the century, BDSM began to appear in standard catalogs of human sexual behavior

(e.g., Chesser, 1949; Hite, 1976; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948, 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1966), which often continued to treat BDSM as a deviant form of sexuality. This shift to including BDSM in catalogs of human variation—even as it sustained understandings of BDSM as deviant—was one of the earliest precursors of the eventual move away from defining BDSM interest or participation as a form of mental illness.

Early sociological approaches to BDSM also relied on a deviance model but focused on social rather than biological or psychological factors that influence BDSM participation (Plummer, 1975a, 1975b; Seidman, 2003b). These studies were interested in explaining rather than “curing” BDSM (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1967; Rubington & Weinberg, 1987) and sought to identify and describe the BDSM population. These studies in sociological and related fields focused primarily on the gay leather community because it was assumed then that the BDSM population was comprised primarily of gay men (e.g., Gebhard, 1969; Kamel, 1980, 1983; J. A. Lee, 1983 [1979]; Spengler, 1977; T. Weinberg, 1978).

The shift away from studying BDSM primarily to identify a “cure” was part of the larger shift within sexuality studies and social scientific research more generally away from labeling some behaviors as “deviant” and others as “normal.” That sea change in approaches to human behavior was part of a larger movement away from stigmatizing populations and activities including drug users, gamblers, homeless populations, LGBQ (then referred to as “homosexual”) populations, and others through relying on a “deviant”/“normal” binary. Deconstructing that binary was one of the key conceptual shifts in sociological understandings of human experience in the twentieth century.

Beginning in the early 1980s, sociological approaches to BDSM began to include heterosexual participants. At the same time, sociological studies were shifting away from the early model of deviance, which framed BDSM as “unnatural” behavior. In its place, scholars move toward a social constructionist model that emphasized that perceptions of what is “normal” in relation to human behaviors and desires are the product of social norms rather than an immutable moral or natural order (Beckmann, 2009; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Seidman, 2003a; Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; T. Weinberg, 1987). That shift in approaches to BDSM closely paralleled the shift away from understanding “homosexuality” as a form of deviance in favor of focusing on the ways that *all* sexualities are socially constructed within the context of social systems that frame some as “normal” and others as “deviant.”

In the 1990s, empirical work shifted from studying participants and practices to exploring the organization of BDSM subcultures and communities (e.g., Brodsky, 1993; Ernulf & Innala, 1995; Gosselin, 1987; M. Graham, 1998; Houlberg, 1991; Levitt, Moser, & Jamison, 1994; Moser, 1998; Van Lieshout, 1995), further solidifying the influence of the social constructionist model. Moving beyond the study of individuals and their behaviors to communities and the social norms within them paved the way for sociological contributions to BDSM studies. The emphasis on understanding BDSM as socially constructed—first developed largely by sociologists and scholars in related fields—is now widespread in the field of BDSM studies (Guidroz, 2008).

BDSM studies have recently reached critical mass as an emerging interdisciplinary field, representing disciplines as divergent as sociology, communication studies, literary studies, anthropology, law, psychology, and others. The emergence of BDSM studies as a nascent field in the early 2000s was marked by the publication of several interdisciplinary anthologies (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Langdridge & Barker, 2007b), as well as the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* (2006) dedicated entirely to BDSM (the first issue of a social science journal devoted exclusively to BDSM). In its current form, the field of BDSM studies—despite significant differences in disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological commitments—is held together by three primary areas of agreement: (1) BDSM is, by definition, consensual and therefore distinct from abuse and violence; (2) participation in BDSM practices is not, in and of itself, indicative of pathology; and (3) BDSM is a complex social (rather than medical or psychiatric) phenomenon, deserving of serious academic study.

### 3 | THE EMERGING FIELD OF BDSM STUDIES

Scholarship on BDSM has moved far beyond its original home in sexology and psychoanalysis. While this review focuses primarily on work in sociology and related social science fields, the broader field of BDSM studies is

thoroughly interdisciplinary. For example, in fields such as cultural studies, critical race studies, feminist and queer theory, and literary studies, scholars examine literary, filmic, and pornographic representations of BDSM, focusing most frequently on sadism and masochism (Call & Call, 2013a, 2013b; Cruz, 2015; Deller & Smith, 2013; A. J. Musser, 2014; A. J. Musser, 2015; Smith & Luykx, 2017; van Heerden, 2018; Wilkinson, 2009; Ziv, 1994). In public health and related fields, scholars examine physical, psychological, and health outcomes related to BDSM participation (Kolmes, 2003; Leistner & Mark, 2016; McGregor, 2015). Scholars in the field of mental health and counseling have taken an active role in reducing bias toward BDSM practitioners among mental health practitioners (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2004, 2005; Kolmes, 2003; Kolmes et al., 2006). Scholars in those fields have also developed kink-aware counseling training programs and practices (Chahbaz & Chirinos, 2016; Kolmes et al., 2006; Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008; Nichols, 2006; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015). BDSM participants have also themselves published an extensive literature on BDSM practices and identities, including a number of manuals and guidebooks that discuss the history of BDSM as well as identities and community norms (e.g., Brame, 2015; Hardy & Easton, 2001; Kaldera, 2010; Wiseman, 1996).

The vast majority of extant sociological scholarship on BDSM focuses on communities and participants in the United States, Canada, and Europe, with the largest bodies of literature focusing on U.S. and U.K. BDSM communities. Indeed, it has been only in the last decade that work on BDSM in other national contexts has begun to appear. Published work on BDSM in Italy (Zambelli, 2017), Belgium (Holvoet et al., 2017), Sweden (Carlstrom, 2017), Spain (Puig Rodas, 2017), Israel (Kaplan, 2007), Australia (Steinmetz & Maginn, 2015), and India (Sharma & Ghupta, 2011) is now accessible in English language journals. Comparative work, however, is virtually nonexistent in the field, particularly comparative work beyond the United States–Europe–Canada nexus. We know exceedingly little about differences in activities, identities, or communities across cultural and national contexts.

Another related but separate body of interdisciplinary scholarship examines E. L. James' blockbuster *Fifty Shades* franchise. The *Fifty Shades* series is a fictional account of an abusive relationship involving pseudo-BDSM practices. Within BDSM communities, participants are extremely critical of the *Fifty Shades* franchise and of the influx of what many see as “fake players”—individuals who have been exposed to the *Fifty Shades* books or movies and seek out BDSM communities with a highly inaccurate sense of what BDSM involves. In the authors' fieldwork, many BDSM participants referred derisively to the “50 Shaders”—individuals who show up in online or physical BDSM communities with a strong sense of entitlement to play opportunities and assume identities and roles that community members have spent years or even decades learning and developing. Additionally, *Fifty Shades'* portrayal of BDSM in highly stigmatizing ways—relying on the very stereotypes that BDSM is a form of mental illness that BDSM communities have challenged for decades—is a further source of caution or even hostility for BDSM participants interacting with “50 Shaders.” Some BDSM participants, however, perceive the influx of people whose interest was sparked by exposure to the *Fifty Shades* franchise as a valuable opportunity to educate people about safe BDSM practices and the importance of consent in ways that directly contradict the messaging in the *Fifty Shades* books and movies. Because the *Fifty Shades* franchise focuses on a fictional, abusive relationship and the narrative is not grounded in the experiences of actual BDSM participants, I do not discuss in detail the growing body of academic scholarship on the *Fifty Shades* franchise (e.g., Altenburger, Carotta, Bonomi, & Snyder, 2017; Attwood & Walters, 2013; Bonomi, Altenburger, & Walton, 2013; Bonomi, Nichols, Carotta, Kiuchi, & Perry, 2016; Case & Coventry, 2018; Deller & Smith, 2013; Ghetler, 2013; Gray, 2018; Leistner & Mark, 2016; A. J. Musser, 2015; Srdarov & du Coudray, 2016; Upstone, 2016; van Heerden, 2018).

## 4 | CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF BDSM

In what follows, I discuss several current lines of research within sociological studies of BDSM: the meanings of BDSM practices and experiences, the development of BDSM identities and the intersections of those identities with other social identities (e.g., race, gender, and class), and the organization and importance of communities to BDSM social life and identities. I identify the major contributions and existing gaps in each research line. For ease of



organization, I discuss these areas of research separately. However, there are numerous areas in which these lines of research overlap. For instance, work on the meanings of BDSM that interrogates the persistent assumption that BDSM is a sexual experience overlaps with work in the identities area of research that explores whether BDSM ought to be understood as a sexual identity or orientation akin to LGBQ and heterosexual orientations. Similarly, work on BDSM as a transcendent, connective experience that comes out of scholarship that explores the meanings of BDSM for participants intersects with scholarship on the importance of community connections.

## 4.1 | Meanings of BDSM experiences

Across an extremely wide range of meanings that BDSM experiences have for participants, consensuality is one of the underlying commonalities. Yet participants themselves recognize that while consent is held up nearly universally across BDSM communities as a requirement, processes of consent are complex and consent violations do occur (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Holt, 2016). In a study of sexual assaults in the BDSM community in Israel, Haviv (2016) shows that fear of victim blaming, desire to be discreet and not “out” themselves or others as BDSM participants, shame about the context in which the assault took place, and other factors frequently dissuade BDSM participants from reporting sexual assaults. Barker (2013) shows that BDSM communities are creating evolving understandings of consent that shift the responsibility for consent and safety from an individualistic to community model. In the community responsibility model, the community is accountable for acting on consent violations and excluding known consent violators. Similarly, Holt (2016) finds that despite focusing on strategies for keeping BDSM “safe, sane, and consensual,” participants recognize consent violations and respond to those violations most frequently through a community-based model in which designated community leaders take the lead in imposing sanctions on consent violators. Importantly, consent and consent violations are not defined strictly in relation to sexual interactions. Instead, consent is upheld as a requirement for *all* interactions—anything from hugging as a greeting to touching someone's BDSM toys to forms of address to which parts of someone's body may be struck or restrained in the context of a scene.

Despite the long-held assumption in scholarship on BDSM that BDSM is a sexual interest, identity, or activity, multiple studies over the last decade have challenged that assumption. While some empirical studies show that for some BDSM is a sexual experience (Faccio, Casini, & Cipolletta, 2014; Rehor, 2015), others show that BDSM does not always have a sexual meaning or that it may have a sexual meaning that is secondary to other meanings for participants (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008; Newmahr, 2010, 2011; Sagarin, Lee, & Klement, 2015; Simula, 2013, 2014, 2019; Sloan, 2015). Building on the recognition that BDSM does not always have a sexual meaning for participants, BDSM scholars have expanded understandings of the range of meanings of BDSM. Chief among the meanings that have emerged in empirical studies of BDSM include BDSM as spiritual, as therapeutic/healing, and as serious leisure.

BDSM participants in several studies across empirical contexts describe the spiritual and/or transcendent aspects of BDSM (Beckmann, 2007; Fennell, 2018; Holt, 2016; E. Lee et al., 2016; Lindemann, 2012; Sagarin et al., 2015; Schneider, 2009). Beckmann (2007), for instance, shows how for some BDSM participants the ritualistic aspects of some BDSM activities (e.g., piercings) create transcendent spiritual practices. Beckmann found that some participants explicitly associated their experiences of BDSM with shamanistic and other spiritual experiences with mystical elements. For instance, many BDSM participants report out-of-body experiences, feelings of deep connection with others present during a ritual or scene, and/or feelings of deep connection to the universe similar to experiences reported by participants in other kinds of rituals that use intense physical experiences to produce changes in psychological or emotional states (Carlstrom, 2018; Hebert & Weaver, 2015; Klement et al., 2017; E. Lee et al., 2016; Stiles & Clark, 2011). Similarly, in work on professional dominatrixes (women who engage in BDSM for pay) and their clients, Lindemann (2011) found similar themes among professional BDSM participants and their clients. Both dominatrixes and their clients described BDSM as being spiritual, transcendent, and transformative, focusing

particularly on the ritualistic spiritual aspects of BDSM. Fennell (2018) analyzes the ways in which BDSM participants use BDSM for spiritual fulfillment, reporting that almost half of American and Canadian BDSM participants report at last occasionally using BDSM for spiritual connection and/or transcendent experiences.

Additionally, some BDSM participants describe BDSM experiences as being therapeutic or healing (Barker, Gupta, & Iantaffi, 2007; Lindemann, 2011, 2012; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). For instance, Barker, Gupta, and Iantaffi (2007) find that healing narratives of BDSM emerge in both popular culture representations and the lived experiences of BDSM participants themselves. They show that for some participants, BDSM is a way to navigate experiences of powerlessness, embarrassment, discomfort, and stress. BDSM participants use BDSM scenes to work through those feelings in a way that they describe as similar to several types of talk therapy. Hammers (2014) examines queer women's experiences of BDSM, exploring how survivors of sexual violence use BDSM to work through trauma and find healing. Lindemann (2011) also finds that dominatrixes frame their work as having important therapeutic value for their clients, such as helping clients work through emotional trauma, everyday stress, and coming to accept parts of themselves that are stigmatized in mainstream society.

In one of the newest lines of research on BDSM, some scholars have examined BDSM as a form of leisure, variously placing BDSM on a continuum between casual and serious leisure (Franklin-Reible, 2010; Newmahr, 2010, 2011; Prior & Williams, 2015; D. J. Williams, 2006; D. J. Williams & Prior, 2015; D. J. Williams, Prior, Alvarado, Thomas, & Christensen, 2016). Newmahr (2010, 2011), for example, argues for an understanding of BDSM as serious leisure. In the public northeastern BDSM community where Newmahr conducted the ethnographic fieldwork that grounds Newmahr's analysis, BDSM functions as a form of "serious leisure"—participants invest significant time and resources, acquire a unique and highly specialized set of physical and mental skills, and develop community identities. In another vein of research on BDSM as leisure, Williams and colleagues (Prior & Williams, 2015; D. J. Williams & Prior, 2015; D. J. Williams et al., 2016) find that BDSM participants experience BDSM on a spectrum of leisure, with some pursuing BDSM as a form of casual leisure, emphasizing playfulness and adventure, and others pursuing the more invested form of serious leisure reported by Newmahr.

Across many of these studies, an underlying theme is the importance for BDSM participants of connections with others—both specific individuals and a broader community. Turley, King, and Monro (2018), for instance, find that collaboration and connection are key to enacting mutual erotic fantasies among BDSM participants. Faccio et al. (2014) similarly find that relationships rather than activities are core concerns of BDSM participants and report a similar emphasis on connection with partners. Whether pursuing BDSM as a form of serious leisure, using BDSM for spiritual or transcendent experiences and connections, or as a therapeutic or healing outlet and activity, connections with others are reported as a key aspect of BDSM across the literature.

## 4.2 | Intersecting identities

In addition to ongoing debate in the field over whether BDSM should be studied through a sexuality lens, there is a striking lack of consensus about whether or when it is most useful to approach BDSM through the lens of behavior/practice, identity, orientation, interest, or some combination thereof. For instance, in the introduction to their field-defining edited volume on BDSM, for instance, Langdridge and Barker (2007a, p. 3) describe BDSM as both practice and identity (defining it specifically as set of "sexual practices/identities"). By contrast, in the same volume, in an overview of themes of BDSM expression, Moser and Kleinplatz (2007, p. 41) define BDSM as "a variety of sexual behaviors." Elsewhere, Moser and Kleinplatz (2006, p. 4) note that there is disagreement over whether to best understand BDSM as "a set of sexual behaviors comparable to anal or oral sex 'or' as a type of sexual orientation." And in a review of the social scientific literature on BDSM, Weinberg (2006) focuses on sadomasochistic "behavior," while also acknowledging an emerging line of research on BDSM identities.

At the same time, however, there is also a strong line of research that focuses explicitly on processes of identity construction among BDSM participants, foregrounding an identity-based understanding of BDSM. For instance,



Chaline (2007, 2010) examines how gay men who participate in BDSM develop “gay SMer” selves through a scripting process. Similarly, Mosher, Levitt, and Manley (2006) explore the coconstitution of gay, male, and leather identities among gay leathermen. They show that gay leathermen develop a unique form of masculine identity that blends vulnerability and care for others with an esthetic masculine appearance constructed around highly symbolic and ritualized elements of leather dress. Langdridge and Butt (2004), drawing on Plummer’s work on sexual stories, show how BDSM participants construct BDSM identities through telling sexual stories that focus on rejecting pathology and negotiating consent. Yost and Hunter (2012) also examine the narratives that BDSM participants construct in relation to their identities, investigating how participants narrate their initial attraction to BDSM. Yost and Hunter find that participants construct self-stories that frame their interest in either strongly essentialist or strongly constructionist ways and that these narrative self-strategies are mutually exclusive.

Regardless of where the field moves in relation to the question of whether to understand BDSM as activity, interest, orientation, identity, or some combination thereof, a growing body of scholarship in the field examines the ways that BDSM intersects with and is influenced by other social identities. In the sociological literature, much of this work has focused on the intersections of BDSM with gender and/or sexuality. Smaller bodies of sociological work exist in relation to race, class, and disability.

#### 4.2.1 | Gender

One line of this research examines the ways that gender identification, expression, and experience unfold in the context of BDSM interactions. Early work by cultural studies scholars such as Hale (1997) laid the groundwork for this line of research. Hale argues that BDSM functions as “gender technology,” which creates a “culture of two” in which alternative arrangements of gender are possible. Hale explains that in the culture of two created by BDSM leatherplay, gender operates differently than in other social contexts:

*When I was a boy with my dyke daddy, in that culture of two I was a boy. I was not an adult woman playing a boy's role or playing a boy, nor was I an adult woman doing boy in some other way ... I was a boy with her by engaging in a gender performativity that made sense to both of us as a boy's gender performativity. (Hale's italics, p. 229)*

Participants in such “cultures of two” can interpret bodies and create pleasures in ways that resist normative understandings of gender. Similarly, SM activist Califia (2000, p. 159) argues that for some participants, BDSM identity is more important than gender and sexual orientation, explaining “I identify more strongly as a sadomasochist than as a lesbian ... If I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I'd pick the boy.” Theorists such as Califia argue that BDSM provides a space in which gender is comparatively less important than in other social settings.

Several empirical studies explicitly test the question of whether BDSM participants are more likely to hold patriarchal and/or traditional gender role beliefs in comparison with the general population. Cross and Matheson (2006) found no empirical support for the hypothesis that BDSM replicates patriarchal views of gender. Using the Feminist Attitudes Questionnaire and the Spanos Attitudes Towards Women Scale, which test support for feminist beliefs and rejection of traditional gender roles, respectively, the authors found no significant differences between the scores of the BDSM and non-BDSM samples. On the basis of these findings, Cross and Matheson argue that BDSM participants are no more likely than the general population to hold anti-feminist beliefs and/or to support conservative gender ideology. Similarly, Ritchie and Barker (2005, p. 236) show that BDSM participants intentionally resist and subvert traditional gendered hierarchies. They explain that participants explicitly challenge those hierarchies in ways that illuminate “the potential for SM to reveal and subvert heterosexual and patriarchal power imbalances.” Yost (2007) also investigates the extent to which normative associations between gender and power influence BDSM interactions, focusing on the sexual fantasies of BDSM participants. Yost found that BDSM participants who have stable BDSM identities (e.g., dominant and submissive) have fantasies that lack gendered differences related to power, while

BDSM participants who switch (take different BDSM roles in different situations) have fantasies that conform to traditional gender roles. This finding suggests that a stable BDSM role may override traditional gender roles, at least as they relate to sexual dominance and submission.

Newmahr's (2011) ethnographic study of a BDSM community in the northeastern United States lends additional support to this finding, illuminating the processes through which BDSM role comes to be a more salient social category than gender. Newmahr (2011, p. 107) explains, "[T]he social organization of the Caeden community [the BDSM community on which the ethnography is based] is not especially intertwined with embodiments of masculinity and femininity. Instead, the community is organized around the related but significantly distinct identities built around topping and bottoming." Additionally, Bauer's (2007, 2008, 2014) extensive interviews with queer (including gay, lesbian, and trans identified) BDSM participants in Europe and the United States demonstrate that BDSM provides a space for self-exploration, particularly in relation to gender and through the use of role play. Bauer argues that BDSM functions as a "safe space" or "playground" for experimenting with gender, which participants view as unique to BDSM contexts.

Similarly, Simula and colleagues (Better & Simula, 2015; Simula, 2012, 2014) find that some BDSM participants explicitly work to decenter gender in the context of BDSM experiences, including in ways that make BDSM role more salient to their sexual orientation than is gender. Yet Simula and Sumerau (2017) also find that while many participants decenter and resist gender in the context of BDSM, gender continues to shape BDSM experiences in myriad ways in BDSM communities. Martinez (2018) also finds mixed results in regard to the centrality of normative beliefs about gender and BDSM role. In a mixed-methods study of BDSM role fluidity, Martinez found that men were significantly more likely to self-identify as dominants, masters, or tops, and women as submissives, slaves, or bottoms, but that women and queer/pansexual individuals across gender identifications disrupt that binary through switching.

Bauer's (2007, 2014, 2018a, 2018b) work is the only empirical work to date that explicitly centers the experiences of trans individuals and as such makes a critical intervention into a largely cis-centric body of scholarship. Bauer's work draws attention to how individuals renegotiate masculinity and femininity in relation to social norms about gender, age, and power. Focusing on questions of embodiment, Bauer shows how participants use BDSM interactions themselves to renegotiate bodily boundaries and deconstruct boundaries between material and immaterial matter, such as in relation to how strap-on dildos are perceived by BDSM participants in relation to bodily boundaries.

## 4.2.2 | Sexualities

Much of the work on gender and sexualities overlaps, exploring how participants challenge normative understandings of gender, sexualities, and bodies. While early work on BDSM focused primarily on the gay leather scene, the focus on gay BDSM has decreased in recent decades as samples have moved toward being representative of het/pan communities. Yet the gay, het/pan, and queer/lesbian communities have markedly different histories and relationships to sexual stigmatization. At present, in the American and European cultural contexts, these BDSM communities operate largely as mutually exclusive rather than overlapping scenes, though large-scale events such as BDSM conventions can bring these often separate communities together.

While recent studies include the experiences of LGBQ individuals, little work specifically examines the experience of participants with plurisexual identities, such as bisexual and pansexual. Sprott and Hadcock's (2018) study of bisexual, pansexual, and queer BDSM participants is an important exception to this trend in the literature. Sprott and Hadcock find that for these participants, BDSM activities can have many uses, including gender exploration and healing from shame and trauma related to sexual identity/orientation. Simula's (2012) work examines behavioral bisexuality but does not specifically address bisexuality as an identity. While some studies include pansexually-identified participants (Bauer, 2018a; Newmahr, 2010; Simula, 2019), whether and how plurisexual (e.g., bisexual and pansexual) BDSM participants' experiences differ from those of their monosexual (e.g., lesbian, gay, and heterosexual) counterparts is a pressing lacuna in the literature.

Work on asexually identified BDSM participants is almost nonexistent, with the notable exception of Sloan's (2015) important work. Sloan (2015) finds that asexually identified individuals are able to use the emphasis on transparency and negotiation present in BDSM communities to navigate nonsexual relationships. Sloan shows that the explicit negotiation strategies common to BDSM communities help asexually identified individuals navigate sexual expectations. Future work should further explore the experiences of asexual BDSM participants. The disclosure decisions and experiences of asexual, trans, and participants with disabilities are also a potentially productive point of future research. Do BDSM participants who identify as sexual, trans, and/or disabled find that the normalization in BDSM communities of frank conversations about bodies, sexual interests and limits, medical histories, and so forth reduce discomfort and stigmatization or do those conversations occur in ways that replicate ableism, transphobia, and asexual erasure?

Several scholars have noted the frequent overlap across BDSM and polyamorous communities (Barker, 2005; Bauer, 2010; Pitagora, 2016; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). BDSM- and polyamorous-identified individuals share numerous structural factors in common, including the stigmatization of their identities and relationship structures. In both communities, transparency and negotiation are fundamental. Do polyamorous BDSM participants feel that the skill sets they develop in negotiating relationships and boundaries transfer readily from one context to the other, or do participants feel that the skill sets required for effectively communicating as a polyamorous partner and a BDSM participant differ?

### 4.2.3 | Disability

In a much-needed addition to the field, Tellier (2017) explores the intersections of disability and BDSM, noting that in neither the disability studies nor BDSM studies literatures is this intersection acknowledged. Tellier outlines several ways in which BDSM and disability experiences overlap among individuals who identify as both BDSM participants and individuals with disabilities. Frequent points of commonality include prioritizing clear communication, bodily and mental experiences of navigating pain and power, and a desire to reduce stigma around these identities. In earlier work, Reynolds (2007) used the experiences of BDSM practitioner and disability rights activist Bob Flanagan to show how understandings of disability rights in relation to sexuality are framed almost exclusively in relation to heterosexual, mainstream sexual practices. Flanagan used BDSM practices both to manage pain and to explore his own bodily experiences, particularly in relation to his cystic fibrosis. In his art and activism, Flanagan used BDSM to explore questions of consent, control, power, humiliation, and other issues, pushing the boundaries of understandings of the body, disability, and the erotic.

The experiences of BDSM participants with disabilities, however, remain a massive lacuna in the existing scholarship and are likely to play a critical role in illuminating key debates in the field, such as those around the relationships among bodies, the erotic, and the sexual, and how individuals navigate the meanings of those categories. Given the norm within BDSM communities of extensively discussing and negotiating boundaries, including past experiences of trauma, medical history, disabilities, and current illnesses or injuries, it would be particularly fruitful for future research to examine whether individuals with disabilities find BDSM communities to be more inclusive in comparison with other social and sexual communities. As with BDSM, disability is also a marginalized and often stigmatized identity, as Tellier (2017) shows in her discussion of the ways that BDSM participants with disabilities face double marginalization through the stigmatization of both disability status and BDSM interest. Future research should also explore strategies BDSM participants with disabilities use to negotiate specific forms of double marginalization.

### 4.2.4 | Race/ethnicity

Work that specifically examines the experiences of BDSM participants of color is almost entirely absent from the existing body of sociological and social scientific work. A small handful of studies—largely within the fields of cultural and literary studies—examine the role of race and race play in the context of pornographic and literary

representations of BDSM (e.g., Cruz, 2015; Cruz, 2016; A. J. Musser, 2014; Smith & Luykx, 2017). The significant differences between pornographic and literary depictions of BDSM and the lived experiences of BDSM participants themselves, however, make analysis of such representations of BDSM beyond the scope of this review.

Bauer's (2008, 2014) analysis of the Whiteness of BDSM communities in Europe and the United States sheds important light on the overwhelming Whiteness of the samples in most extant studies of BDSM. Bauer explores the ways that White privilege operates in BDSM communities, arguing that White privilege operates in BDSM contexts much the same as it does in other social spaces, as a background, usually invisible context. Similarly, in an ethnography of the US Bay Area BDSM community, Weiss takes up an extended analysis of the ways in which the Whiteness of the Bay Area's het/pan community frames scenes and play. For instance, Weiss analyzes how White participants engage in race play (a particular type of scene or play in which racial inequalities and/or stereotypes are used to create psychological and emotional experiences) in ways that rely deeply on rarely interrogated White privilege. For instance, "slave auctions"—competitions in which a BDSM participant who identifies as a slave is "sold" for a specified time to the highest bidder—and the very terminology of master/slave roles and identities are rarely critically interrogated.

Yet while these works play a vital role in naming and interrogating the overwhelming Whiteness of BDSM communities, the experiences of BDSM participants of color remain strikingly absent in the current literature. Future research must explicitly center the experiences of participants of color. It should also specifically examine the ways in which racism and White privilege influence the experiences of participants of color and decisions about whether and how to engage in BDSM communities. Research on BDSM communities of color is relatively rare. This is in part because most previous research on BDSM has focused on public BDSM communities and organizations, which tend to be primarily White, while participants of color are more likely to play and socialize in private settings such as people's homes (a pattern similar to that among queer women participants). At the same time, there are a growing number of BDSM groups organized specifically for and by participants of color, particularly in leather communities. Additionally, the primarily White researchers (myself included) who have studied BDSM have not done enough to build racially diverse samples. It is also likely that participants of color are less willing or interested in speaking with White researchers about their experiences. Future scholarship should explicitly foreground communities and participants of color and explore whether and how the experiences of participants of color differ across BDSM communities. Work that examines whether and how individuals with BDSM interests choose to participate in BDSM communities must also explicitly examine the role of race and racism in those decision-making processes.

#### 4.2.5 | Class

BDSM scholars have also documented the significant investment of economic resources required to attain status within the community, making entry to the community disproportionately available to high-SES individuals (Newmahr, 2010, 2011; Weiss, 2011). Weiss, for instance, shows how the competitive accumulation of expensive BDSM paraphernalia is used as a status marker in the het/pan BDSM community in the US Bay Area. Weiss argues that access to the Bay Area BDSM community is mediated by adherence to a consumerist ideology. Similarly, Newmahr (2010, 2011) documents the often-significant investments BDSM participants in a community in the northeastern United States make in BDSM clothing, equipment, and fees and memberships for access to play spaces and events.

In a meta-analysis of studies of BDSM and polyamory, Sheff and Hammers (2011) document the ways in which empirical research on these populations has highlighted the voices and experiences of privileged members of these communities to the virtual exclusion of individuals who are of color and/or of relatively low socioeconomic status. Sheff and Hammers argue that while the overwhelmingly White and high socioeconomic status of participants in most extant studies of BDSM is certainly representative of most mainstream BDSM communities, studies of BDSM participants must intentionally recruit people of color and people of different SES backgrounds to create a more accurate understanding of the range of experiences of BDSM participants. Sheff and Hammers (2011) suggest a

number of factors that shape current samples of the BDSM population, including the tendency to rely on Internet recruitment (which disadvantages individuals of color and lower SES individuals given the persistence of the digital divide); the status protections and buffers against stigmatized identities and practices afforded by White privilege and access to greater material resources; potential participants' possible fears of being tokenized, particularly if they are of color; and the potential disidentification of individuals from historically marginalized groups with stigmatized identities and communities.

### 4.3 | Communities

The earliest BDSM communities in the United States were formed in the 1950s and 1960s by gay leathermen in urban locations—primarily San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. Leather identities and practices were taken up in lesbian SM communities in the 1970s and by het/pan communities in the 1980s and beyond (Rubin, 1998, 2011). Significant differences persist across these communities, with gay S/M communities continuing to be strongly—though not exclusively—organized around and oriented to leather identities. Local gay BDSM scenes or communities are often organized around the social life and physical space of one or more gay leather bars. Local het/pan communities are often organized around a BDSM community dungeon, where play parties frequently take place one or more nights a week. Lesbian and queer women's scenes tend to be much smaller than the gay and het/pan scenes and often use private spaces such as members' homes for gatherings and/or rent out a gay leather bar or het/pan dungeon for a specific event. While some research examines differences in the identities of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual participants, little extant research examines in detail community-level factors. Future research should focus specifically on similarities and differences in community structure, how individuals find and gain access to these communities, and norms across these communities. Given the ways that heterosexual privilege operates to protect heterosexual individuals engaging in sexual acts perceived as deviant, it is also particularly important for future research to examine how individuals across these communities may rely on community support in navigating stigma.

While many BDSM communities are organized around physical spaces such as dungeons or leather bars, the advent of the Internet has created a sea change in access to information about BDSM and to other participants. Increasingly, online communities—such as Fetlife, which bills itself as the “kinky Facebook”—are a key site of connection and community (Wolfaardt & Bakker, 2012). Sites such as Fetlife provide listings of events, discussion forums, personal pages, and a host of other features that create online communities that sometimes overlap with and sometimes exist in ways distinct from local physical communities. While in the past, BDSM participants relied on personal contacts in local communities and personal ads in BDSM magazines and newsletters to find potential partners, online personals are now a leading way in which BDSM participants connect with others (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). Because access to online BDSM communities requires significantly less economic investment than does access to physical communities, future research should specifically examine the role of class and race in online BDSM communities.

As is the case for other marginalized identities and interests, the extant empirical literature suggests that community is an integral part of the experience of BDSM for many kink-identified individuals (B. Graham et al., 2016; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007; Mosher et al., 2006; Newmahr, 2011; Wolfaardt & Bakker, 2012; Yost & Hunter, 2012). BDSM communities provide education and opportunities to meet relationship and/or BDSM play partners and serve to validate BDSM-specific identities, such as submissive, leatherboy, or puppy (Damm, Dentato, & Busch, 2018; B. Graham et al., 2016; Newmahr, 2011; Wignall & McCormack, 2017; Wolfaardt & Bakker, 2012). However, as discussed previously, access to BDSM spaces often requires a significant investment of economic resources—a fee for a membership to a dungeon (BDSM social club, educational venue, and play setting), an entrance fee for each event one attends, appropriate clothing (leather, latex, and other fetish gear), BDSM implements, and a host of related expenses—making access to BDSM community spaces available only to those with relatively high socioeconomic status (Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

BDSM communities and participants have been highly active in organizing against legal sanctions and social stigma around consensual sexual and BDSM activity. For instance, the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom—and member organizations including some of the large and oldest BDSM societies and clubs in the United States, such as the National Leather Association, the Society of Janus, and the Eulenspiegel Society—is highly active in BDSM rights activism. BDSM participants have successfully advocated to allow BDSM conventions to take place at major hotel chains, for kink-aware training for mental health professionals, for the removal of BDSM from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5),<sup>3</sup> launched a large-scale study of consent violations within the BDSM community, and provided legal support to BDSM participants facing legal charges in relation to consensual BDSM practices (Wright, 2018).

Yet the legal status of BDSM remains complex (Attwood & Walters, 2013; Ridinger, 2006; Weait, 2007; White, 2006). In the United Kingdom, as in the United States, BDSM that leads to bodily harm (as defined by the courts) is illegal, though as with virtually all other activities, the laws are unevenly enforced such that individuals with social privilege (e.g., White, heterosexual, middle/upper class, and married) are much less likely to be prosecuted. For instance, in the infamous 1980s Spanner trial in the United Kingdom, police in Manchester engaged in an undercover operation that led to the arrests and imprisonment of gay men participating in the gay Manchester BDSM scene. The judge held that consent could not be used as a defense in cases that involved bodily harm, resulting in the convictions and imprisonment of gay men engaged in consensual BDSM activities, including the alleged “victims” who were convicted of aiding and abetting their own “assaults.” In other cases involving heterosexual couples in a similar time period, however, similar consensual BDSM activities were ruled noncriminal. In addition to the criminalization of consensual BDSM itself, BDSM participation has been used against individuals in child custody hearings, wrongful termination suits, and many other cases in which BDSM is used to frame someone as “unfit,” “dangerous,” and/or “mentally unstable” (Klein & Moser, 2006; Wright, 2014).

Pointing in part to the complex legal status of BDSM, scholars working on sexual citizenship have examined the ways in which BDSM communities have deployed various claims to sexual citizenship. Weiss (2008), for instance, contrasts the antinormative goals of the Gay Shame movement with the rhetoric of professionalism and “sameness” deployed by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom and other BDSM organizations advocating for BDSM rights. Langdridge and Parchev (Langdridge, 2006; Langdridge & Parchev, 2018; Parchev & Langdridge, 2018) show how the safe, sane, consensual mantra is used by BDSM participants in an attempt to legitimize BDSM practices. At the same time, however, they demonstrate how efforts to normalize BDSM in appeals to citizenship also operate to bring BDSM more fully under control of the state. Further, attempts to normalize BDSM often strip it of the very transgressiveness that is part of its appeal for many participants.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Work on the sociolegal status of BDSM raises important questions about agency and the body: Should individuals have the right to determine what they wish to do with their bodies? Should those rights be curtailed by normative understandings of what is appropriate to do with one's body? Why are exceptions to the notion that one cannot meaningfully consent to activity that could potentially result in bodily harm made for sports, for example, but not for activities such as BDSM? What is the relationship between social understandings of “acceptable” risk and the criminalization of some activities (such as BDSM) and protection of others (e.g., football, MMA fighting, and extreme sports)? Across a variety of topics and areas, studies of BDSM shed important light on social norms and the systems that support them.

Similarly, work on how BDSM communities navigate the legal status and stigmatization of BDSM raises questions of broader sociological import. Do rights-based movements necessarily bring individuals more fully under the purview of the state? What rhetorics and logics do community-based and social movements rely on, how effective are they, and at what cost? In the American context—as well as in other national contexts in which there is a



resurgence of the alt-right—how does the current political moment impact how individuals who belong to marginalized and/or alternative groups, identities, and communities navigate their identities and activities? Do problematic representations of groups or identities otherwise nearly completely absent from mainstream representation have a positive impact simply by making those identities and individuals visible or do the stereotypical and/or universalizing nature such representations often take do more harm than good? Current debates about representations of LGBTQP and trans characters, as well as of racial-ethnic groups in popular media (e.g., *Crazy Rich Asians*), point to the ways in which studies of the representation of BDSM can contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between stigmatized, stereotyped, and/or underrepresented groups and their depiction in popular media.

Studies of BDSM have a number of other significant contributions to make to sociological understandings of human experience and society. For instance, key questions in the field of BDSM studies—such as whether to best understand BDSM as interest, identity, or orientation—are relevant to the study of a host of other identities and practices. For example, studies of being “called” to specific kinds of work or religious commitments draw on similar experiences among different populations in which individuals perceive themselves to have an “innate” drive, orientation, or identification. BDSM scholarship can help illuminate the kinds of practices, narratives, and community norms that support or discourage essentialized understandings of identities, particularly by examining debates over essentialized identity narratives within BDSM communities themselves. Similarly, debates within the field of BDSM studies over whether to understand BDSM as a sexual practice are of potentially enormous consequence for the sociology of sexuality more broadly. Those debates disrupt how sexuality studies defines itself, as well as how scholars draw boundaries around “sex” and “the sexual.”

Additionally, as a set of interwoven communities, both physical and cyber, BDSM communities and scholarship on their development and change over time can play an important role in sociological understandings of the ways that cyber communication and communities impact the structure, organization, and experience of community. Research on how the Internet may have shifted who identifies with BDSM or participates in BDSM communities and how can help sociologists develop deeper understandings of the ways that the Internet may be used as a resource by individuals with stigmatized or marginalized identities, as well as the challenges that individuals encounter in attempting to use cyber spaces in relation to such identities.

There are several important directions for future research on BDSM. First, as highlighted in the previous section on intersecting identities, future research should focus on foregrounding the experiences of individuals from backgrounds currently severely underrepresented in extant empirical studies, specifically people of color, people from working and lower middle-class backgrounds, and people with disabilities (Bauer, 2008, 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Future research on any topic within BDSM studies should be attentive to these gaps in the representation of BDSM participants in existing work. Additionally, future studies should specifically explore the ways that these and other identity categories influence and are influenced by BDSM participation and identification.

Second, due in part to the hidden nature of the BDSM population and its relatively small size and also in part to the relatively recent development of BDSM studies as a field, the vast majority of work on BDSM to date has focused on BDSM as a general identity or interest, with very few studies focusing on specific identities or practices that fall under that broader umbrella. This trend is particularly striking given common recognition among scholars in the field that myriad specialized identities, roles, and interest exist under the broad umbrella of BDSM. One study that provides a particularly useful model is Plante's (2006) work on the sexual spanking community. Plante finds that individuals who engage in consensual sexualized spanking—despite understanding themselves to be part of the broader BDSM community—intentionally distance themselves from the larger BDSM community in order to resist the stigma attached to BDSM. Plante finds that sexual spankers use narratives that focus on framing sexual spankers as being “just like everyone else” with the exception of a particular sexual interest. Future studies of specific identities and interests under the BDSM umbrella could follow Plante's lead in focusing on how specific identities are constructed and maintained in relation to the broader BDSM community. In another study of a specialized interest and identity within the broader BDSM umbrella, Wignall and McCormack (2017) explore “puppy play”—role play in which BDSM participants adopt behaviors that mimic those of biological puppies for sexual and/or emotional gratification. They

find that while some participants engage in puppy play primarily for sexual satisfaction, others rely on puppy play to achieve emotional fulfillment and relaxation, paralleling findings in studies of the broader BDSM population that show that relaxation and emotional experiences are common motivations for BDSM participation (Simula, 2019). These scant few studies that focus on specific aspects of BDSM suggest that there may be significant differences across identifications and interests within the larger BDSM community, and these differences should be explored in much greater depth in future research.

Third, most studies focus on the experiences of individuals who engage in time-limited BDSM interactions, such as sexual spankers and those who engage in puppy play described above. On the other end of the spectrum, Dance, Kleinplatz, and Moser's (2006) study of those who engage in "24/7 Slavery"—consensual, full time power exchange where both partners agree that one individual will have primary or exclusive decision-making responsibility in the relationship—understands their identities and interests as going far beyond a sexual interest, instead extending to virtually all aspects of their lives from daily routines and rituals to household chores, food choices, finances, and so forth. Much of the existing literature on BDSM focuses on individuals who engage in time-limited BDSM interactions (e.g., scenes and play). Future research should explore potential similarities and differences among those who engage in time-limited BDSM and those who engage in full-time BDSM. Research in this area would also contribute to our developing understanding of factors that lead participants to understand their BDSM as interest, activity, identity, and/or orientation.

Finally, nearly all extant work in the field focuses on participants who are involved to a greater or lesser degree in BDSM communities, be they physical or online. While accessing participants who are not engaged in BDSM communities represents a serious methodological challenge, their experiences may be significantly different from those of individuals for whom BDSM community is part of their experience. For instance, do individuals who buy how-to manuals about BDSM or read kinky blogs on-line and incorporate those practices into their lives and relationships have different perceptions or experiences of stigma than those who participate in physical and/or cyber BDSM communities? Are individuals who participate in BDSM communities more likely to develop BDSM identities and/or to develop different types of identities than people who participate in BDSM activities without participating in BDSM communities?

Sociological scholarship on BDSM continues to grow in ways that make important contributions to sociological understandings of interpersonal relationships, identities, and the development of communities and subcultures. While much work on BDSM examines ways in which BDSM participants resist normative cultural categories and meanings, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, scholarship in this field also sheds important light on how inequalities are reproduced even in the context of new identities and subcultures. Current debates within BDSM studies have the potential to illuminate broader conversations in sociology in areas as diverse as social psychology, organizations, gender, sexuality, race, media, law, and others. As with many areas of sociological study, the potential of future work to make a significant impact depends in large part on its ability to expand its focus to be more fully inclusive of the experiences of people of color, LGBQ people, trans and nonbinary people, people with disabilities, and people from working class and poor backgrounds.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Primarily, heterosexual scenes or communities are often known within BDSM communities as "pansexual" scenes to indicate that they are open to people of all genders, yet gay, lesbian, and queer BDSM participants most frequently participate in gay or lesbian scenes rather than in the het/pan scene.
- <sup>2</sup> Within BDSM communities, it is common practice to refer to mark consensual power exchanges in part by the use of capitalization for the Dominant or Master and no capitalization for the submissive or slave. I preserve that practice here to

provide readers with an example of the ways that identities are symbolically communicated and meanings inscribed in part through language.

<sup>3</sup> Though BDSM interest in and of itself has been depathologized in the DSM-5, BDSM remains a diagnostic category to be used for individuals for whom BDSM interest or activity interferes with other major areas of life.

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